

Christine Winecki

Title: *The Girl in the Check Coat: Survival in Nazi-Occupied Poland and a New Life in Australia*

Author: Christine Winecki (Irena Wilder)

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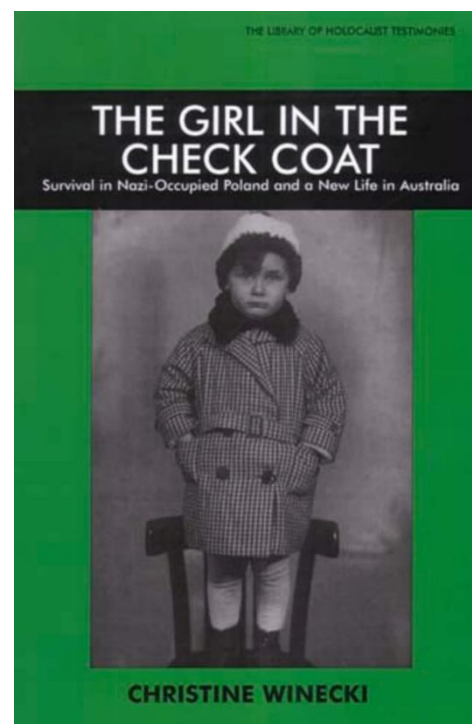
Location of Book: Monash University Library, Lamm Jewish Library, Sydney Jewish Museum and other public libraries.

Cities/towns/camps: Ukraine: Stanisławów (Ivano-Frankivsk), Lwów (Lviv); Poland: Warsaw; Austria: Wiener Neustadt forced labour camp, Vienna, Mattighofen; Russia: Moscow; Czechoslovakia: Prague; Australia: Melbourne.

Note: those cities/towns/camps underlined are those which are most central to the narrative

Genre: Memoir

Key events/experiences: Blood Sunday massacre; child survivor in hiding; Polish forced labourer.



The Girl in the Check Coat is the 238-page memoir of Polish-born child survivor Christine Winecki who fled the Stanisławów ghetto to go into hiding in Warsaw, before being sent to Austria as a Polish forced labourer. It also depicts the story of Christine's husband, Oton Windholz – a survivor of a labour camp in Siberia – and their postwar life in Warsaw until their emigration to Australia in 1968.

Pages 1-33 outline Christine's and Otto's family backgrounds and pre-war childhoods in Stanisławów and Ustroń. Pages 34-115 describe their respective wartime experiences in alternating chapters. Pages 116-86 recount their post-war life in Poland, marriage and birth of their children, escape to Vienna in 1968 and subsequent emigration to Australia. Pages 187-238 cover the author's later years in Australia and her travels.

Christine Winecki was born Irena Wilder on 20 December 1928 in Stanisławów, Poland (now Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine) to Janka Gelehrter and Oscar Wilder. She had an older brother, Emmanuel, who died shortly after birth. Her father was a successful lawyer and she grew up in a well-to-do, highly assimilated Jewish family. Although Jewish by heritage, the family was non-observant and participated in both church and national traditions. Irena's mother died tragically in April 1937 when she was eight years old.

With the outbreak of war Stanisławów came under Soviet occupation; Christine's father lost his legal practice and the family was evicted from their home. They were taken in by their Jewish maid, Pepa.

In June 1941 Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and Stanisławów was occupied three weeks later. On 3 August her father was placed on a list of Jewish intellectuals and summoned to Gestapo headquarters. This was the last time Irena saw her father, who along with approximately 500 men was tortured and murdered in the nearby forest.

On Sunday 12 October 1941, the Jews of Stanisławów were rounded up by armed German soldiers and Ukrainian militiamen, taken to the market square and marched to the Jewish cemetery. Standing at the back of the column, Christine and Pepa could hear gunshots as they advanced slowly towards the cemetery. After many hours, the Germans released the remaining Jews. They later learnt that approximately 10,000 Jews were murdered that day in what became known as the Bloody Sunday Massacre.

In December, two weeks before the Stanisławów ghetto was officially closed, a Ukrainian stranger took Christine to Lwów to live with her Aunt Lucja Jampoler. The following day in Lwów she was taken to St Anthony's Catholic Church where the vicar, Father Czapran, provided her with a forged birth certificate.

Christine was then taken to live with her uncle Ludwik, his wife Stefa, and their son Zbyszek. She began attending St Anthony's Church, where the nuns taught her Catholic prayers and customs to help her pass as a Polish Catholic.

In January 1942 the family relocated to Warsaw, where they were hidden on the 'Aryan' side of the city in the flat of Mr Fritz, a member of the underground. They survived on false identity papers belonging to deceased Warsaw residents. After months without adequate food, Christine received another new identity as Krystyna Solecki, and began attending school in September 1942.

In the summer of 1943, Aunt Lucja arrived in Warsaw with her mother – Christine's grandmother Amalia – along with her son Lolek, his wife Hanka, and their baby. Not long after, grandmother Amalia left the apartment and never returned; she was presumed to have been caught by *schmalzowniks* – Polish collaborators who betrayed Jews in hiding.

In October 1943, *schmalzowniks* also discovered Aunt Lucja's new hiding place, forcing them to flee. Christine left to rendezvous with them in a nearby park but was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned. Her thorough knowledge of prayers and customs convinced authorities she was a Polish Catholic and she was released.

Christine returned to her hideout where she discovered that all her relatives had fled. Overwhelmed and alone, she allowed herself to be caught in a roundup of Polish labourers. She was transported to the Wiener Neustadt forced labour camp near Vienna. A week later, Christine was sent to Vienna, where she worked as a maid for the Stimmler family.

In late 1944, Allied bombing raids intensified and Vienna was evacuated. Christine relocated with the Stimmler family to a villa in Mattighofen where she spent the final months of the war. In February 1945, American troops liberated the region and

Christine travelled to the American-run Ranshofen DP camp. She was repatriated to Warsaw in October where she continued living under her assumed name of Krystyna Solecki.

In Warsaw, Christine reunited with her surviving aunts Stefa and Lucja and uncle Ludwik. She found work as a typist for the Ministry of Foreign Trade and resumed her education by attending night school. In 1954, she married Oton Windholz. They had two daughters, Joasia and Olenka.

In 1967-68, during the Polish political crisis, Jews again became targets of an antisemitic campaign and Oton was dismissed from his job. Under mounting pressure, the Winecki family left Poland in April 1968. Sponsored by Oton's cousin Jurek, who lived in Melbourne, they travelled first to Vienna, where they were supported for six months by HIAS while awaiting visas and transport to Australia. On 10 October 1968 they boarded a flight to Australia, settling in Melbourne.

The Girl in the Check Coat is a detailed autobiography of the author's life and wartime experiences. Eloquently written, it offers a vivid account of her pre-war childhood in Stanisławów, her wartime survival in hiding, and, with equal depth, her post-war years under communist rule. Beyond its biographical narrative, the book is also rich in historical, political, and ethnographic observations. It is interwoven with the experiences of her husband, Oton Windholz, told through excerpts from his wartime diary. The text was originally written in Polish and published in 1999 under the title *Od Stanisławowa do Australii (From Stanisławów to Australia)*. After receiving acclaim in Poland, it was translated into English and released by the commercial publisher Vallentine Mitchell in 2007.